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EAST TIMOR
A land of crosses**
By *John Pilger*

Crosses are almost everywhere in East Timor: great black crosses etched against the sky, crosses on peaks, crosses in tiers on hillsides, crosses at almost every bend of the road. They litter the earth and crowd the eye.

I had with me a hand-drawn map of where to find a mass grave where some of the murdered of the 1991 massacre in the Santa Cruz cemetery had been buried; I had no idea that so much of the country was a mass grave, marked by paths that end abruptly and fields inexplicably bulldozed, and earth inexplicably covered with tarmac; and by the legions of crosses that march all the way from Tata Mai Lau, the highest peak, 10,000 feet above sea level, down to Lake Tacitolu on its Calvary line of crosses that looks across to where the Pope said mass in 1989 in full view of a crescent of hard, salt sand beneath which lie countless human remains.

All the time David Munro and I were in east Timor we felt we were on borrowed time. We had only an aeronautical map, with blank spaces. The Indonesian military knew the roads and we didn't. At first, as our four-wheel drive vehicle edged along perilous roads, people seemed absent; but they were there. At the end of a long ravine was a village, from which people emerged slowly and with unsmiling, diffident expressions.

The village straddled the road, laid out like a military barracks with a parade ground and a police post at either end; and the inevitable crosses. It was a 'resettlement centre'. To the Timorese, these are little better than concentration camps. 'It is difficult to describe the darkness over us,' said Antonio (a pseudonym). 'Since the invasion, of fifteen in my immediate family, only three are left: myself, my mother and a brother who was shot. My village was the last Fretilin base to fall in 1979. The estimate is that our clan has been reduced from 5,000 to 500.

'Up until 1985 or 1986 most of the people were concentrated in what they called the "central control areas", in concentration camps. Only in the last three years have some of us been allowed to return home, but we can be moved again at any time. The Indonesians use spies everywhere; and certain things are not to be said, even within the family. People have to pretend that everything is okay. That is part of finding a way to survive. But a human body and mind have limitations. Once it boils over, people just come out and protest and say things which means they'll wake up dead the next day. I suppose you can compare us to animals. When animals are put in a cage they always try to

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escape. In human beings it's much worse. You must understand that for us who live here, it's hell.'

A silence has enveloped east Timor since the Indonesian invasion in December 1975. The basic facts ought to be well known, but they are not. As a direct result of the invasion some 200,000 people, or a third of the population, have died. This estimate was made in 1983 by the head of the Roman Catholic Church in East timor. What in other countries would be condemned as a crime against humanity has, it seems, been quietly deemed acceptable.

Proportionately, not even Pol Pot in Cambodia killed as many people; yet Western intelligence has documented the unfolding of the genocide since the first Indonesian paratroopers landed in the capital, Dili, on 7 november 1975 - less than two months after two Australian television crews were murdered by Indonesian troops, leaving just one foreign reporter, Roger East, to witness the invasion. He became the sixth journalist to die, shot through the head with his hands tied behind his back and his body thrown into the sea. Thus, in the age of television hardly a single image or a reported word reached the outside world. There was just one radio voice, picked up in Darwin, 300 miles to the south, rising and falling in the static. 'The soldiers are killing indiscriminately,' it said. "Women and children are being shot in the streets. We are all going to be killed... This is an appeal for international help. This is an SOS. We appeal to the Australian people. Please help us...'

No help came. Tens of thousands of people died just resisting the invasion. 'I was the CIA desk officer in Jakarta at that time,' Philip Liechty told me, 'I saw the intelligence that came from firm sources. There were people being herded into school buildings by Indonesian soldiers and the buildings set on fire; anyone trying to get out was shot. There were people herded into fields and machine-gunned. We knew the place was a free-fire zone. None of that got out.'

There was little verifiable news for two years. In 1977 two nuns in Lisbon received a letter from a priest in hiding in East Timor. 'The invaders,' he wrote, 'have intensified their attacks. The bombers do not stop all day. Hundreds die every day. The bodies of the victims become food for carnivorous birds. Villages have been completely destroyed. The barbarities, understandable in the Middle Ages, justifiable in the Stone Age, all the organized evil, have spread deep roots in Timor. The terror or arbitrary imprisonment is our daily bread. I am on the *persona non grata* list and any day I could disappear. Genocide will come soon...'

On 12 November 1991 a brave British cameraman, Max Stahl (a pseudonym) videotaped Indonesian troops murdering a crowd of young people in the Santa Cruz cemetery in Dili. This broke the silence. Some, like Austr lian Foreign Affairs Minister Gareth Evans, one of the Indonesia regime's most reliable friends,

sought to explain away the massacre - which had left 528 people dead and 'disappeared'-as an 'aberration'. But such apologetics were undermined by the reaction of Indonesia's senior military officer who said he wished to 'wipe out' more 'delinquents', and by international revulsion at the visual evidence of wounded, helpless people dying among the gravestones.

The history of East is very different from that of the other islands that make up volcanic stepping stones, rising from clear deep seas, east of Bali. The Suharto regime has tried to justify its illegal occupation on the grounds of what it calls 'deeply felt and long-standing ties... of common brotherhood'. In fact, the east Timorese have little in common with Indonesia and especially the Javanese who rule it. Whereas most Indonesians are Muslims, Hindu or Buddhist, the East Timorese are animist or Catholic. Even their colonial experience was different, with the Portuguese 'Latinizing' the eastern half of the island and insulating it from the upheavals of the Dutch colonies, including West Timor, that became Indonesia in 1949.

Portuguese rule was benign, neglectful and, as in other Portuguese colonies, multiracial. Not even the Catholic Church, it seems, resorted to forced conversion, which perhaps explains why Christian and animist beliefs and prejudices coexist with harmony. However, the Church, as elsewhere, ran the schools and created an elite indebted to its liturgy of power. This changed dramatically with the Indonesian invasion. An East Timorese church emerged which represented a direct challenge to the Indonesian occupation. Thus, the Church became, as the historian Peter Carey has written, 'the only institution capable of communicating independently with the outside world and of articulating the pain of the East Timorese people'. In 1989 Bishop Carlos Felipe Ximenes Belo, the head of the Catholic Church in East Timor, appealed directly to the world in a letter to the United Nations Secretary-General. 'We are dying as a people and as a Nation,' he wrote. He received no reply.

In April 1974 Portugal's old fascist order was swept aside by the *Revolucao dos Cravos*, the 'Carnation Revolution'. Events in Lisbon moved quickly and chaotically. The tiny 'overseas province' of East Timor, 'asleep at the end of the earth', as one Portuguese commentator later wrote, 'was on no-one's list of priorities'. However, within a month of the revolution in Lisbon two main political groups had formed in East Timor. The Timorese Democratic Union (UDT), led by members of the colonial administrative elite and coffee plantation owners, called for federation with Portugal and eventually independence. The Timorese

Social Democratic Association (ASDT), which later became the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor, or Fretilin, comprised most of the younger nationalist opposition who wanted genuine economic reforms.

The Indonesian Military Dictatorship claimed that Fretilin would turn East Timor into a base for communist insurgency, which was absurd. Most of Fretilin's leaders were Catholic socialists who looked to the Cape Verde philosopher Amical Cabral and the Brazilian priest and educator Paulo Freire. Above all, they were nationalists who wanted their people to control their destiny, trade and resources.

Many of Fretilin's leaders were the sons of Timorese who had saved the lives of Australian soldiers fighting the Japanese in Timor during the Second World War and were confident that their former allies would discharge their moral debt, especially now that the inspiring anti-colonialist Gough Whitlam was Prime Minister. His labor Government would surely support the rights of the people of East Timor. Australia had been among the first to recognize the former Portuguese colony of Guinea-Bissau; and Whitlam's personalized relationship with Suharto suggested that his views would be taken seriously in Jakarta.

What the Fretilin leaders could not possibly measure was the depth and complexity of post-war Australia's obsession with Indonesia. In September 1974 Gough Whitlam met Suharto in Java. According to journalists briefed by Australian officials, Whitlam and Suharto 'agrees that the best and most realistic future for Timor was association with Indonesia', and that Whitlam had made clear that 'an independent Timor would be an unviable state and a potential threat to the area'.

In October of that year a clutch of generals close to Suharto launched a secret intelligence operation, code-named *Operasi Komodo*, aimed at destroying the burgeoning independence movement. A coalition formed by Fretilin and the UDT was undermined by Indonesian provocateurs and collaborators, leading to a civil war that claimed some 1,500 lives. By September 1975 Indonesian special forces had infiltrated the country; and their discovery by two Australian television crews, near the town of Balibo, resulted in the murder of the six newsmen.

The official Australian attitude to Indonesia was expressed by the ambassador in Jakarta, Richard Woolcott, who in July of that year cabled Canberra: '[We should] leave events to take their course ... and act in a way which would be designed to minimize the public impact in Australia and show private understanding to Indonesia of their problems... I know I am recommending a pragmatic rather than a principled stand but that is what national interest and foreign policy is all about.'

On 28 November 1975 Fretilin - which had won the civil war and a majority in local elections - declared unilateral independence before a cheering crowd in Dili. One week later President Gerald Ford and his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, arrived in Jakarta on a visit described by a State Department official as 'the big wink'. The invasion had been set down for 5 December;

but Americans demanded that the Indonesians wait until after the President had left; and on 7 December, as Air Force One climbed out of Indonesian airspace, the bloodbath began.

The inhabitants of Dili were subjected to what the historian John Taylor has described as `systematic killing, gratuitous violence and primitive plunder´. At 2pm on 9 December, 59 men were brought on to the wharf at Dili harbour and shot one by one, with the crowd ordered to count. The victims were ordered to stand on the edge of the pier facing the sea, so that when they were shot their bodies fell into the water. Earlier in the day, women and children were executed in a similar way. An eyewitness reported: `The Indonesians tore the crying children from their mothers and passed them back to the crowd. The women were shot one by one.´

As in Pol Pot´s Cambodia, the first to die were often the educated-public officials, nurses, teachers and minorities. The Chinese population was singled out. Five hundred were reportedly killed on the first day of the attack. An eye witness described how he and others were ordered to `tie the bodies to iron poles, attach bricks and throw the bodies in the sea´. The killing of whole families and children, appeared to be systematic. An officer explained: `When you clean the field, don´t you kill all the snakes, the small and large alike?´

The Un General Assembly and Security Council passed a total of 10 resolutions calling on Indonesia to withdraw its troops `without delay´. Unlike the UN´s resolve against Iraq´s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, nothing happened. In a secret cable to Henry Kissinger, the US ambassador to the UN, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, boasted about the `considerable progress´ he had made in blocking UN action on East Timor. This, he explained, was part of `a basic foreign policy goal, that of breaking up the massive blocs of nations, mostly new nations, which for so long had been arrayed against us in international forums´.

Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, who had succeeded Whitlam, flew to Jakarta in October 1976 and gave the first public recognition of the Indonesian occupation. He said his Government `acknowledged the merger´ but `only for purely humanitarian reasons´. Fraser was accompanied by the head of BHP, Australia´s largest company. BHP had recently acquired a controlling share in the Woodside-Burmah company, which had been drilling for oil in the seabed of East Timor, said to contain one of the richest oil and gas fields in the world.

Western governments vied with each other to sympathize with `Indonesia´s problems´ - and to sell jakarta arms. In 1978, at the height of the massacres, British Foreign Secretary David Owen approved the sale of British Hawk ground attack aircraft. He said estimates of the killings in East Timor had been `exaggerated´. Britain is today the biggest arms supplier to the Indonesian military; in 1993 British Aerospace agreed a $1,200 million

deal for more Hawk aircraft. A succession of ministers has misinformed Parliament that the Hawks would not and could not be used in East Timor. There is plenty of eyewitness testimony to the contrary. Max Stahl, David Munro and I have interviewed people who have seen the distinctive Hawk's devastating effect on the civilian population.

We also have evidence that the Indonesians conducted a second massacre following the killings in the Santa Cruz cemetery in 1991. In our film, *Death of a Nation : The Timor Conspiracy*, witnesses tell how Indonesian soldiers systematically murdered the wounded.

In 1989 Garth Evans, Australian Foreign Minister, and the Indonesian Foreign Minister, Ali Alatas, toasted each other in champagne flying above the Timor Gap, having just signed a treaty that allowed Australian companies to drill for oil and gas. Professor Roger Clark, the world authority on international law at Rutgers University in the US, told me : "It is acquiring stuff from a thief. If you acquire property from someone who stole it, you're a receiver." Evans described the Indonesian enquiry into the Santa Cruz killings as "positive and helpful" and very encouraging", adding that the victims unaccounted for "might simply have gone bush". On the day of Amnesty's condemnation further Timor Gap contracts were issued.

There have been some hopeful developments in the last year. An amendment to a Foreign Aid Bill before US Congress calls on the President to "consider" the human-rights situation in East Timor before approving arms sales to Indonesia. Meanwhile, the UN Human Rights Commission has voted to condemn Jakarta over East Timor; Portugal is taking action at the World Court in the Hague over the legality of the Timor Gap Treaty; a similar action is before the Australian High Court.

Jose Ramos Horta, the special representative of the National Council of Maubere Resistance - East Timor's foreign minister in exile - has put forward an imaginative three-phased peace plan which would lead to a referendum on the country's future. `Indonesia,' he said, `should seize the olive branch we are offering'. Peter Carey says Portugal could play a key role just as Britain did in the decolonization of Zimbabwe in 1979 and 1980. `The first step,' he said, `should be the withdrawal of all Indonesian troops... For the Government of Indonesia, it must be made clear that international respectability will elude them until after the East Timor issue is resolved.'

By all accounts the Timorese resistance should have been wiped out years ago; but it lives on, as I found, in the hearts and eyes of almost everyone: eyes that reflect a defiance and courage of a kind I have not experienced anywhere else. Recent opposition has come vociferously from the young generation, raised during Indonesian rule. It is they who have kept alive a

nationalism that combines a political entity with a spiritual love of country and language that Indonesian terror and bans have only strengthened. And they have been able to endure, it must be said, by the lifeline provided by extraordinary groups and exiled Timorese around the world.

In 1989 a courageous Australian woman called Shirley Shackleton managed to get to Balibo, the Timorese town where the Indonesians murdered her husband, Greg, with the other television newsmen. She had wanted to plant a tree in Greg's memory. A priest offered the yard behind the church; and Shirley planted the sapling with Indonesian troops surrounding her. `They had not allowed any Timorese to be there,' she said. `But as I knelt, saying a few words to Greg, the most wondering singing washed over me. On the other side of the road, a young people's choir had timed its practice to my being there. I shall never forget those beautiful voices. They came through the barrier the Indonesians had set between us, and they comforted me. They will never be defeated.'